

Public Health (Alcohol) Bill: Landmark legislation for a healthier Ireland

What is the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill?

The Public Health (Alcohol) Bill, published by Minister for Health Leo Varadkar in December 2015, is landmark legislation that provides a unique opportunity to tackle Ireland's harmful relationship with alcohol and bring about significant improvements in public health, safety and wellbeing, with a particular focus on protecting children and young people from alcohol harm.

This legislation is a key part of a range of measures planned under the Healthy Ireland framework, which will work together to improve our health and wellbeing, both as individuals and as a nation.

Its goal is to reduce our per capita alcohol consumption in Ireland from 11 litres of pure alcohol for every person aged 15 and over (2014), to 9.1 litres (the OECD average), by 2020. Reducing alcohol consumption across the population will reduce the burden of alcohol harm.

The health impact of harmful drinking in Ireland

Alcohol consumption in Ireland almost trebled between 1960 and 2001, rising from 4.9 litres of pure alcohol per person aged 15 and over to 14.3 litres. It decreased in the years that followed as an increase in excise duty, followed by the recession, impacted on alcohol's affordability.

However, alcohol consumption has nonetheless remained at very high levels and, as the economy recovers, it has begun to rise again over the past two years. Drinking until drunk is also a particular concern, as binge drinking, which is a major driver of alcohol harm, is commonplace in Ireland.

- Alcohol is responsible for three deaths every day in Ireland. That's over 1,000 deaths per year
- One in four deaths of young men aged 15-39 in Ireland is due to alcohol
- Alcohol is a factor in half of all suicides in Ireland. Alcohol is also involved in over a third of cases of deliberate self-harm, peaking around weekends and public holidays
- Liver disease rates are increasing rapidly in Ireland and the greatest level of increase is among 15-to-34-year-olds, who historically had the lowest rates of liver disease

Alcohol's harm to Irish society

Alcohol's harm to others is experienced in every community, ranging from the nuisance factor, feeling unsafe in public places, drink-driving, to a violent attack by an intoxicated drinker.

Although not often visible in public, alcohol's harm to others within the family has very serious consequences for the safety and well-being of family members, with children the most vulnerable.

Meanwhile, all taxpayers are responsible for paying for the cost of alcohol harm to the State, mainly driven by health and crime costs, while there is also a considerable loss of economic output due to alcohol misuse.

Therefore it's clear that while drinking alcohol is an individual choice, it is one that has significant social and economic impacts, and Ireland's high level of alcohol consumption has an impact on all of us, regardless of our personal relationship with alcohol.

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Public Health (Alcohol) Bill: Main Measures

Health labelling of alcohol products

Consumers have the right to make informed decisions about the products they purchase, especially those, such as alcohol, which are potentially harmful to their health. Labelling will help drinkers understand the health risks associated with alcohol, such as the several types of cancer it can cause and the risks of drinking during pregnancy, as well as allowing people to track their alcohol and calorie intakes.

Structural separation

The Public Health (Alcohol) Bill provides for the structural separation of alcohol products in mixed retail outlets, such as supermarkets and convenience stores. This will mean that they will no longer be displayed and sold like 'every day' or 'ordinary' products, such as bread or milk. Retailers will have to choose to store alcohol either in a separate area of the store, or in a closed storage unit or cabinet which contains only alcohol products.

Price-based promotions

The Public Health (Alcohol) Bill will restrict price-based promotions, which are used extensively in Ireland to attract customers, with young people particularly price-sensitive and often targeted by these promotions, such as discounted student nights or quantity discounts (e.g. 2 for 1 offers).

Alcohol marketing

Alcohol marketing, including advertising, sponsorship and other forms of promotion, increases the likelihood that children will start to use alcohol, and to drink more if they are already using alcohol. Young people's drinking patterns have a direct effect on their health, development and welfare, so reducing children's exposure to alcohol marketing is a child protection issue.

The Public Health (Alcohol) Bill contains a number of important regulations that will reduce children's exposure to alcohol marketing. Advertisements must only give specific information about the nature of the product, such as where it is from, its price, a description of the taste etc. This will mean that advertisements will be less likely to glamorise alcohol or make it appealing to children. Other measures include:

- Advertisements in cinemas will be limited to films classified as over 18s
- There will be a 9 p.m. broadcast watershed for advertisements on television and radio
- The Bill will prohibit advertising in certain places, including in or near schools and playgrounds

Minimum unit pricing

Minimum unit pricing (MUP) is a 'floor price' beneath which alcohol cannot legally be sold and is based on the amount of pure alcohol in a product, measured in grammes.

One standard drink in Ireland contains 10 grammes of alcohol and the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill provides for an MUP of €1 per standard drink.

MUP is a targeted measure, designed to stop strong alcohol being sold at very low prices in the off-trade, particularly supermarkets, where alcohol is frequently used as a 'loss leader' and sold below cost.

The easy and widespread availability of such cheap alcohol is a major factor in harmful drinking in Ireland. The MUP of €1 will not affect the price of any alcohol products in pubs, clubs and restaurants, but will raise the price of the cheapest products in the off-trade.

The benefits of MUP

- It will save lives.
- There will be a reduction in alcohol harm for both the person drinking in a high-risk manner and those around them.
- It will reduce alcohol-related hospital admissions.
- It will reduce alcohol-related crime.
- There will be a decrease in workplace absences due to alcohol.
- There will be a reduction in the costs of alcohol harm to the State and taxpayer.
- It will not affect those who drink within low-risk limits in terms of alcohol consumption and spending, regardless of income levels.
- Large multiple retailers will not be able to simply absorb price increases, as can happen with other pricing policies (e.g. excise duty).
- It will not affect the price of alcohol products in pubs, clubs and restaurants.
- It will not affect tourism.
- It will not affect alcohol exports or lead to job losses.
- It will not influence rates of cross-border shopping, as Northern Ireland also plans to introduce MUP, in conjunction with the Republic of Ireland.